

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Leonid Alaverdov

Interviewer: Julia Kanin

<http://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/leonid-alaverdov>

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Julia Kanin: This is the Coney Island History Project, my name is Julia Kanin, and today we are talking to...

Leonid Alaverdov: ... Leonid Alaverdov.

JK: How and when did you immigrate to America?

LA: I immigrated to America in '93 from Baku. I'm a *bakinets* (native of Baku). I was born and lived in Baku. I had been living in Tbilisi for some time. I studied there, at one time, in an aviation college. Then I served in the army for three years. And then I returned to Baku... I came in '93 from there when these events had begun in Baku: a discord began between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. My father was Alaverdov, a Cherkess [native of North Caucasus], my mother was Berta Yakovlevna Finkelstein. He was her teacher, preparing her [to enter college]. And my father married her, and I was born as a result.

JK: And what were your first impressions of New York?

LA: Oh, you know, absolutely dizzying! I fell in love with this city. I was literally rushing around this city. I studied it in reference books, in guides... I never even took tours here. I was just picking up the guidebook and running around Manhattan. It was so extremely interesting. Well, I was able to walk huge distances. For example, I was getting off near Harlem, where Riverside Church and the General Grant Memorial are located. I was walking from there to the very bottom of Manhattan. I roamed all of Manhattan on foot, and not just roamed but I was learning a lot of interesting things for myself. I was absorbing a lot of impressions. All of this has been reflected in my art, my perception of New York.

JK: And when did you move to Coney Island?

LA: In '93 I lived in Bensonhurst. We rented an apartment there. It was a very difficult time in our lives. First of all, we had arrived with two mothers: my mother and my wife's mother. They were over 90 years old. These women had to be taken care of. It all fell on my wife's shoulders. On top of that, my daughter had two children. She had her third child once she stepped on American soil. How about: She gave birth here. She has three daughters. Therefore, three girls also needed to be watched over. In '98 we were given a list of apartments, they are called projects. And when I got to Coney Island, where I currently live by Sea Gate, and I was shown an apartment with a balcony... On one side is the Verrazano Bridge, on the other side, across the street, is the beach. Just cross the street and I'm on the beach. Of course, we agreed to take this apartment without even a second thought. And we never regretted it. We are quite happy with our life here. Of course, there were things that were totally unexpected. For example, there were very few Russian speaking people. And we started living there. My granddaughters stayed with me in the summer. I was taking them to the beach across the street every morning. Russian speaking

folks were gathering at 8 am. At 10 am everyone was quietly going home. Italians were coming at 10. African Americans were coming in the evening. Russian speaking folks, especially women, could be recognized immediately because everyone was swimming wearing hats. It's only our people who swam in hats! (*laughing*). It's such a small contrast. It was all interesting, of course. We made a lot of acquaintances. There were more Russian speaking folks. Now this area is changing constantly. There were a lot of vacant lots. I don't need to tell you this, but there is active development going on [now].

JK: You live near Sea Gate, right?

LA: Yes, yes... I live nearby... It's called O'Dwyer Gardens.

JK: What was it like in the '90s? Were there any differences??

LA: First of all, the Russian-speaking community was very small. Then the first people appeared on West 24th, as I already said, and after that – on West 37th. Now I like this area more and more because it's being developed nicely. I don't know... Of course, I will not be able to see everything, I don't have enough time left, but I hope (*laughing*).

JK: Before you moved, you lived in Baku and worked as a designer. Tell me how did you start working in that specialty?

LA: Well, first of all, I have to say that I am an engineer. I'm an oil and gas equipment engineer. Before that, I graduated from the Aviation college in Tbilisi. I graduated from a university in Baku. That was my specialty. I worked as an engineer, then I taught in a school. I liked my job very much. And in '63 all over the Union in the cities of the capitals of the Union Republics (almost all) art and design bureaus began to open. We didn't know the word "design" then. We knew the word "artist-constructor." My friend came to me. He knew that I had been drawing since childhood, that I always liked art, that I was always creating and doing something. He came and said, "Lyonya! Run quickly, there is an art and design bureau opened!" Well, of course, I went there and talked it over. I was graciously welcomed. I started working as an ordinary designer at first. I was very quickly advancing in my career. Then I started working as a team manager, as a division manager, as a deputy of the head of the department... It was a very interesting group of professionals, designers. Only later we learned this word "design." We almost considered it a profanity. We worked as artist-constructors. It was a very interesting job. There were a lot of business trips in search of clients because we had to find people and interest them [in our work]. Eventually I found an electro-thermal equipment company. Baku had an electro-thermal equipment factory. And there was a whole chain of electro-thermal equipment factories and institutions that were producing [this type of equipment]. The main institution was located in Moscow. I was on business trips all the time. I met manufacturers, they were quite interested in my work. And one day I was summoned by the senior leadership of these factories, by the head of the Technical Department of the Ministry of Electrical Industry. I went to him and became very surprised: he had a stack of my reports, work, [and] explanatory notes on his table. He offered me the job of creating a branch of artistic design of electro-thermal equipment at the electro-thermal equipment factory in Baku. And to service all electro-thermal companies. It was dozens of companies. Well, such a great opportunity opened up. And I was offered the job of leading this organization. But I refused to lead it.

JK: Why?

LA: Because I knew that if I lead it, I'd leave creative work. So, I came to Baku and told the head of the department: "If you want, there is an opportunity to head the industrial branch. And I'll be your deputy, but on the condition that I continue making work." Well, that was the start. We

created the industrial branch. And I was the chief artist-constructor of the industrial branch. I had been working there for a long time and then left for a period. I moved to work in the industry - I missed the constructor work. I went to work in the Institute of Paint Coating. I worked as a chief specialist, then I became the head, started working as acting chief engineer of the branch of Baku's Institute. My friend, Pecherskiy Semen, a Jew, was acting principal, and I was acting chief [engineer], and the District Party Committee couldn't approve us. The deputy director of the main institute came twice, went to the District Party Committee and demanded to approve us. In the end, the chief director of this entire main institute came. And he went to the Party's Central Committee. In short, he was told that it is not a Jewish republic here, but Azerbaijan. And the principal will be Azerbaijani.

JK: And tell us how after all this you moved to work with tapestries?

LA: We were artist-constructors or designers, as we were later called, all our free time we tried to do some art. Well, there were different kinds. We had waves: we did art photography, then we did - all of us bought cameras. We shot films. So, we tried to capture our whole lives on film. Then we all rushed to do embossing - it was in fashion at that time. We all had a fancy for embossing. I was looking for other things [to do] ... Suddenly, by chance, I discovered tapestries. This was preceded by an exhibition of Lithuanian artists in Baku. When I saw modern tapestries, that's how my obsession started. I was literally obsessed with such beauty! At the same time my brother came from Moscow and said: "Let's go visit one of my friends." So, I went. Turned out, he was an artist, a tapestry-maker. I saw a frame in his house that he had used for weaving hand tapestries. This was manual carpet weaving. It wasn't a machine. There are ways to make tapestries with the help of a special machine but this one was done manually. I saw it and, as an engineer, I immediately understood all the technology. Plus, I dived into the libraries, began to acquire books that I could possibly find related to the art of tapestry, to the work of different artists who were making tapestries. I got carried away with it and began making my first tapestries. A sketch needs to be done for it. It is necessary to make it life-size, it's called a cardboard loom. The same size. Then it's important to make a frame. Vertical threads are pulled - it's the foundation of the future tapestry, and a picture is woven little by little with horizontal color threads. You know, sometimes I'm asked at exhibitions how it is being made, usually, I say, "Do you know how to mend socks?" I say it to Russian women, Russian speakers. "Yes, of course!" "It's the same thing", I say, "you just mend it with colored threads, and there is a drawing behind it - on a piece of cardboard. And you sort of draw this picture with colored thread following the stencil. After a while, when I was doing it so successfully, I began to exhibit these tapestries... Well, exhibit where? I bragged in front of my own friends. I brought them [tapestries] to my workplace. I worked at the Institute of Design. We had an architecture department. We even had female designers who had graduated from a university's textile department in Moscow. That means that tapestries were a part of their curriculum. But they didn't do it at home because it takes too much space and it's very laborious work.

JK: And you learned it by yourself!

LA: And I learned it by myself. After a while, that artist to whom my brother introduced me, came to my workplace. I showed him [my tapestries], I had my work on the wall. "Well," I said, "Do you have any comments?" He said, "Nothing, everything is good. Everything is OK!" After a while, a note appeared suddenly in the Baku' newspaper that the ethnographers of Azerbaijan in the mountains of Azerbaijan found the remains of the wall carpets of the pre-carpet period. This was when people could not make carpets, they took reeds or sticks, wrapped them with colored wool, created ornaments and hung them in their homes. No one could weave carpets at that time. And I just read that short note. I never saw anyone using that technique. And I became

fixated on that technique. I began making narrative tapestries using the same techniques on sticks: *naman*. I really liked the way these tapestries looked, because color, and reflected light and shadows from these sticks all work there. Basically, very interesting work is created.

JK: What kind of technique is this?

LA: Well, these ethnographers called it "*chatyr*," it means "fan" in the Azerbaijani language. Because that tapestry with an Indian I showed you has vertical threads. It can be rolled up, you see. It's an ancient technique. That's why it rolls out like a fan. I started creating modern tapestries in this technique. No matter how much I tried finding someone who creates similar art, I couldn't find them. There are plenty of artists who make lint-free tapestries that I had been working on at first. It's a very common tapestry technique. First of all, in Azerbaijan. There are no tapestries there, in Azerbaijan they call them *sumakh* – a wall carpet. Usually, it's ornaments of some kind. But without a theme. I create themes, as tapestries are supposed to be. Of course, serious tapestry makers usually make a sketch. Then they create a life-size cardboard loom. And their job is done at that point. Then they hire weavers, who sit down in front of one tapestry. Just like that – one chair beside another one, all together. And they start to weave with wool, acrylic, cotton, metallic thread – anything, just to create this picture dictated by the artist. I do everything myself. I make a sketch, a cardboard drawing, then I sit down to weave. I really like this process. The whole creative process. It's a very lengthy, time-consuming job, but while I'm doing this tapestry I'm thinking about the next one. I have time to think about the next one.

JK: How much time does it take to create a finished tapestry?

LA: You see, sometimes it takes six months, sometimes it takes seven months, sometimes it takes more. First of all, it depends on how long I'm engaged and sit down... Well, sometimes I'm not able to sit for eight hours. It's impossible. But I work steadily on these tapestries. And it takes no less than six months to complete a large tapestry. At least, for me.

JK: What materials do you use? Do you get them in America? Or they are brought to you [from abroad]?

LA: No, no, you see, in Baku, when I started this work, I was purchasing white wool and dyeing it in different colors using special acrylic paints. You know, there were little bags [of dye.] They were used to dye clothing. Or I even used onions, skins of onions. It resulted in colors from brown to light beige depending on the amount of the skins. Everyone was supplying me with these skins, and I boiled these threads in them! Or used a walnut shell, it also gave a special dark tint. It's a tedious process in addition to weaving. When I came to America, I went to one of the stores and I was astonished by the numerous kinds of thread! Frankly, they were acrylic threads, but there was woolen too, but I don't really care whether it's wool or acrylic, or cotton because the most important thing for me is to convey the image and convey the information that I would like to instill in this tapestry.

JK: Is there a difference between tapestries and wall carpets?

LA: There is, of course. Wall carpets are mostly ornaments. Especially in the Caucasus, they are ornamentel. There are carpets in the Baltic too, they are being produced, they're ornamental carpets that can be hung. In Azerbaijan, these wall carpets were called *sumakh*. It was pileless, close in technique to tapestries. They were made from wool. And they were used for... Usually, in Azerbaijani houses, the bedding was rolled up in the afternoon, in the morning and laid in special niches. And they were covered by these carpets, by *sumakhs*. I saw such old houses. It served as decoration and at the same time, they covered niches where bedding was kept.

JK: Azerbaijani carpets were included in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Are they still popular?

LA.: Very, unbelievably popular! Unbelievably popular! The [Azerbaijan] Carpet Museum has now been built in Baku. First of all, it's a miracle of architecture. And the works that are hung there! It's a much-visited museum. People like coming to view [the exhibits] because... You understand, there are very old [and] valuable carpets. It once happened that when we had our eldest granddaughter in Baku, my friend and his wife brought [us] a cut-out piece of carpet. "This is the only intact part of an old carpet we had at home," he said. He had cut out a piece of it. Let your granddaughter crawl on it!" A nice piece of carpet. And when we were leaving, a carpet maker came to me. And when he saw it, he said, "Where's the rest?" I said, "the rest was thrown away." "How?! I would have put a hundred thousand rubles on the table without even a second thought!" Turned out, it was an ancient Persian carpet. And they cut out a piece for my granddaughter to crawl on it in a children's playroom.

JK: You're making tapestries at home, right?

LA: Yes, I create everything from my drawings. Absolutely everything. I see my purpose and value in this, I value it in my works. Old tapestries, by the way... The ancient tapestries of the 15th and 16th centuries were usually copied from paintings by old master artists. For example, if you go to West 122 Street, there is the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. It is a very interesting cathedral that has been under construction for more than 120 years. There are tapestries that were copied from pictures by Raphael. You see, they took pictures of famous painters and made tapestries of them. But they were made with fine thread. Usually, it was fine silk thread. It's even more tedious work because we use thicker thread. But we have a different effect. You can also see such old tapestries in the Metropolitan Museum.

JK: Are there any limitations at your place that make it hard to create a larger tapestry for example?

LA.: Oh, of course, of course. In Baku, I had a huge veranda, which I used for making tapestries, where frankly it was very cold to work in winter, but still, I sat and worked even though I had to wear a coat. Here I am limited to working in a living room. I assemble a frame, pull the threads. Of course, there are scraps, I litter and stain everything. This all falls on my wife's shoulders (*laughing*). She quietly cleans up. By the way, she is the first critic of my works. Her appraisal is very important to me. She even inspires me. For example, I've been sick recently and haven't been making [tapestries] for a year. And my granddaughters together with my daughter would pester me: "Grandpa, when will you begin? When will you begin?" Because it gives us, old men, health, you know. This guild of artists, when we are engaged, it is our cure. We're kept busy with something.

JK: What themes do you choose to create your tapestries?

LA: Oh, all kinds! Well, in Baku there were a lot of themes related to my city. There were a lot of themes related to the sale of my work. I was selling them quite successfully. Then when I moved to New York, I started with... As I told you, I was walking around Manhattan a lot. I'm in love with this city. I've made a lot of tapestries based on what I had seen and what had inspired me. I had visited an Indian museum [The National Museum of the American Indian] in Manhattan, in lower Manhattan, and created this tapestry with an Indian which I called "Silence." If you look closely, in the heart of it is an outline of the city. It is an Indian who was a representative of a warrior tribe. Now silence has come into their lives. Or a poppy I showed you. A red poppy. It's a symbol of the Army for Americans. It's a symbol of victory. It's a clove in Russia, everyone

wears a red clove in a buttonhole, but in America, it's a poppy.

JK: Tell us a little bit about this poppy and what it has to do with Hurricane Sandy. It's a very interesting story!

LA: The poppy I made... Well, the drawing and all this was somewhere in my sketches. Sometimes I visit this museum, the Brooklyn Museum of Art. And there was an exhibition of one Indian artist (I cannot recall his name now) who was making rings from metal plates and joining them into a fabric. He was creating such giant canvasses from these rings. This motivated me to create a few tapestries, to complement my tapestries. Use this technique. Of course, on a smaller scale. I can't use it on such a scale. And it was all related to... Hurricane Sandy passing. We were holding on to our apartment. I live on the tenth floor. We didn't evacuate, even though people had tried to persuade us to leave. Many went to a shelter. We stayed home. But students had been coming to us all the time, asking what we needed, because electricity and gas were cut off. All the stores in the area were flooded. And they were bringing us groceries, mostly canned food. And then I dismantled those cans to make these metal plates. I cut the plates and made these rings similar to what the Indian artist had done who by the way... there was a movie about his giant canvases and the creative process. And he created them with the help of his students. There were hundreds of these students who sat and labored over these rings, joining them into a sort of fabric. I had to do it all myself. Well, that's why it's small in size. I kind of complement my tapestries with this fabric. It's expressive, a way of creating a more eloquent artistic picture.

JK: Tell us a little bit about the Jewish Folk Crafts Guild, a guild of Jewish artists and craftsmen. What does this Guild do? How are you involved in it?

LA: Well, at first, in '93, Nayana sent me. It was an organization that was meeting and greeting all refugees, teaching them initial skills like language, helping us as new arrivals. When they learned that I was an artist, that I was doing creative work like embossing [and] tapestries, they advised me to go to the Jewish Community Center of Bensonhurst. I went to that center and was welcomed. They also arranged an exhibition for me. Soon a group of five people held its first exhibition. The exhibition was in Bensonhurst. When people started learning about it, they started coming – Russian speaking artists, Russian artists. Russian, Jewish, Armenian, whoever! I created a group of Russian artists in Bensonhurst. I was leading that organization for a while, but then for family reasons I had to transfer leadership to another artist. We had exhibitions in that Jewish Center in Bensonhurst, in a college – Touro College exhibitions. Then in Manhattan, we had a lot of exhibitions in a Manhattan college, where a lot of people were interested. And one day we were invited to come and meet a group of Jewish artists and craftsmen in Manhattan. We became very interested. We all moved from one group of Russian artists to that Jewish Center. Well, it's Jewish in name only. We have everyone: Russians, Armenians, Tajiks... That's how we created this group. After a while, this library [Kings Bay Library] offered to exhibit our work, right in this room where we are sitting now. And we began regularly exhibiting our work. We have general exhibitions, group exhibitions, individual exhibitions. There were many famous artists. This all gives us an opportunity to socialize, show our work. As I always say – to air our work. It has to be aired from time to time. Well, among artists it's also called showing off in front of each other (*laughing*). That's all.

JK: How many people are in your Guild?

LA: I think it's 46 or 44 right now. I don't remember. The number changes all the time. Recently we had an enrollment, we accepted eight people, mostly young artists. Well, the young don't stay long. They often do an exhibition of their work, and they as new arrivals are given an opportunity to do solo exhibitions. They gather all their friends to brag. Well, they pay

membership fees to join the Guild, only \$40. And then they disappear. They are interested in selling the work. Well, the works are not selling here. You have to have an art dealer, a professional art dealer who has access to potential buyers. We don't have them. And we stew in our own juice. We have exhibitions here and in Manhattan, in many places. In Baku, I had five exhibitions. I was bragging about it: five exhibitions, can you imagine?! Here I had, let me show you the list, the last exhibition I had – number 90. Ninety exhibitions! In New York! Even in Washington, I even had [exhibitions] at the Russian Center, the Cultural Center at the Russian Embassy. It's our background. It's our life, do you understand? It's our job. We are extremely pleased when we can exhibit our work. To show it, so the public can come and express their opinion. Usually here, in this room of the Public Library, a lot of people gather. We exhibit one or two works per artist, fill all the walls, all totally filled with art. A lot of people come, there is a regular audience that is interested. Or, for example, musical performances are held here. The Gershwin competition was held here, the International Gershwin Music competition. The children had performances here. And of course, they come, and our works are displayed all around. People look at it with interest. It decorates the room and it pleases us at the same time. And on all occasions every space on the wall is filled [with art].

JK: Does anyone purchase these works? Are there interested buyers?

LA: No, not here. Not here. Our audience... I don't know, well, it's very rare for someone to sell something.

JK: What about Manhattan?

LA: Same. You know, in college... I'm telling you, there has to be an art dealer. As I was told and as it was explained to me, people in America don't buy pictures, they invest in them. An art dealer is a person who can demonstrate to potential buyers that if they invest money in this work of art, they wouldn't miscalculate, that the price of it will only rise.

JK: What are you most proud of in your work?

LA.: Well, I'm proud of my work. I'm proud to be busy. My works are viewed with pleasure by artists, my friends, I can exhibit my work here. I told you already, my works are very time-consuming, while I make one work, I already think about the next one. On top of that, I always have a stack of sketches at home. For example, I recently started sorting through my sketches and found two – when I was teaching students in Baku, I was giving them as an exercise. I found these two examples and thought: why couldn't I create tapestries from them? And I created two tapestries based on the Baku sketches! Or I somehow found in the same pile a tiny drawing, literally, done in pen. Well, it was an idea. This tapestry I also have at home now. It all depends. Sometimes it's a momentary experience that I had, or something I'd seen that was interesting, something I want to create. I told you before about The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. I have a huge tapestry that I dedicated to that church, because I was amazed by the scale, and people wandering about the halls seemed to me like shadows. And I called it “Wandering Shadows.”

JK: Please tell us about the tapestry called “Brooklyn Through the Eyes of Immigrants.”

LA: Once, a Brooklyn art organization announced a competition for creative works that illustrated Brooklyn. I applied. My granddaughter helped me fill out the application. My work, a sketch of my work, was approved by this organization. So, I started working on this tapestry, where I tried to reflect the architecture of Brooklyn, the architecture of Coney Island, the architecture of these landmarks in our neighborhood where we live. I was rewarded when they covered all my expenses associated with the creation of this tapestry. It's a relatively large

triptych. They paid for everything – all expenses that I had. Decorative work such as this was created to be exhibited in many venues. Now it is kept [in storage] at my house. Well, this work is mostly for public settings, you know. There are [art] works with themes that are suitable for display at home, but there some that are too bizarre for home [display]. They are better for public venues. Unfortunately, the work is kept hidden away in my closet at home. When there is an interesting exhibition and conditions allow me to load this work in a car and transport it, then I will exhibit it.